

WASHINGTON, D.C. Today, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the fiscal year (FY) 2008 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. The FY 2008 bill represents a \$6.7 billion increase in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) budget, the largest single increase in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration and \$3.8 billion above the president's request. It also includes an \$8.2 billion increase in the Department of Defense's military construction budget over FY 2007 levels and fully funds Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) above FY 2007 levels, a request which is expected to allow the completion of lingering BRAC-related construction projects at Fort Benning. Congressman Bishop, a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, voted for the bill.

"This funding is vital to maintaining and improving our military installations and meeting the demands of our military's ever-expanding mission, including housing our troops and their families at bases both at home and abroad," said Congressman Bishop. "I was particularly gratified that the Committee chose to fully fund the President's request for BRAC and add \$207 million to his military construction request."

Included in the report language, the Committee expressed concern about the impact of BRAC on local school districts, particularly those districts who would receive large influxes of students as a result of military families moving to the area. Specifically, the Committee directs the Department of Defense to work closely with local school districts and base commands to accurately project the increase in school-age population to help communities plan for necessary infrastructure and operating costs to minimize the impact on educational quality.

Meanwhile, though this year's bill provides an unprecedented amount of funding for the Veterans Administration, specific uses for the funding are at the discretion of the Department. Many members, including Congressman Bishop, have expressed that they hope the increased funds will address shortcomings within Veterans' Health Care. While the bill was being discussed on the floor, Congressman Bishop, along with Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL), and House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Chairman Chet Edwards (D-TX), spoke out about growing numbers of HIV/AIDS cases among Veterans.

"The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among veterans who access the VA health care system is markedly higher than that of the general population. Furthermore, barriers within this system contribute to already late diagnoses of HIV among veterans," said Congressman Bishop. "However, VA's current HIV testing policy is based on an outdated testing model which is inconsistent with the CDC guidelines."

Following today's vote, the bill will be sent to the Senate for consideration.

Military Construction:

- The bill provides an unprecedented \$21.4 billion for military construction, family housing, and BRAC. This is an increase of \$207 million over the President's request and \$8.2 billion over FY 2007, which means better barracks, housing and training facilities when troops return from

combat.

- Fully funds the 2005 BRAC at \$8.2 billion; supports the relocation of 70,000 troops from bases in Korea and Europe.
- Provides funds to grow our military forces and begins the process of adding 65,000 Army, 27,000 Marine, and 9,000 National Guard and Reserve troops.

Veterans Affairs:

- Increases the VA budget by \$6.7 billion above the FY 2007 level, the largest single increase in the 77 year history of the Veterans Administration and \$3.8 billion above the President's request for FY 2008.
- For the first time, the total budget for VA medical accounts exceeds the Independent Budget prepared by veterans' service organizations by \$294 million.
- Adds over 1,000 new claims processors to reduce the 400,000 claims backlog within the VA.
- Increases funding to address the VA's repair and maintenance needs to prevent a Walter Reed-type scandal from occurring in the VA system.